



Beyond the staples economy: The case for clean production and just transition

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BRIEF

Beyond the Staples Economy: The Case for Clean Production and Just Transition

By David Peerla

The following remarks were made by long-time friend and associate of CNS, David Peerla, at a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives workshop on the future of the British Columbia economy which was held on Nov. 19, 1998. British Columbia, a region heavily dependent on the exports of forest products, minerals and fish is in the midst of a dramatic economic downturn as commodity prices plummet on the world market. The environmental movement is in retreat and the governing social democratic party is desperately trying to turn around their plummeting political fortunes.

Harold Innis

Harold Innis, the grand old man of the staples tradition of Canadian political economy, wrote tragedies. Consider some last thoughts in an Innis story:

The transition from dependence on a maritime economy to dependence on a continental economy has been slow, painful, and disastrous.

Because of lumber's bulk and cheapness, its markets were profoundly affected by major improvements in navigation such as followed the opening of the Panama canal. With its exhaustion the political framework built up during exploitation has remained as a mould for later developments. It has left stranded lumber mills, ghost towns, rural slums, and weak railroads.

With the depression, prices of basic exports to the United States (notably pulp and paper) declined sharply, as did the

prices of basic exports to Great Britain, especially wheat. It had been possible to have the best of two worlds; it also proved possible to have the worst.

Tragedies end in death, and the classical story of staple extraction is a tale of inevitable death. The fur trade ends, the forest frontier recedes, the cod fishery collapses, and so on.

To move beyond Innis's bleak view of a staples economy, we need to reassess the role and effectiveness of the left in the current crisis. In my view, when it comes to the environment and the economy, the time for simply raising issues and analyzing forces is largely over. Say goodbye to the era of activists as alarm bells. To succeed in our political objectives, we now need to confront those in power who acknowledge the existence of environmental damage and the need for just economic transitions but claim that "nothing can be done" (because the situation is too complicated, too uncertain, too expensive; because there is no solution). What I am proposing is a solutions agenda.

Let's consider the possible makeup of a solution campaign's agenda. One way to look at a campaign is to ponder three levels of ideas that need to be communicated: regime ideas, policy ideas, and slogans.

Regime Ideas

Regime ideas are the basic concepts about how we should create an ecologically sustainable economy. At the level of regime ideas, a solutions agenda would endorse clean production and a just transition. The *clean production of products* would eliminate hazardous waste and hazardous products and use a minimal amount of raw materials, water, and energy. The goal is to produce products that do not damage ecosystems at any stage of their life cycles, from cradle to grave. *Just transition* is about how to move from existing production schemes to clean production schemes — or no production at all — and, as you do that, how to treat the workers and the communities fairly and decently.

Policy ideas

Clean production options include:

- product redesign, replacing an existing product with one using a less toxic or ecologically destructive production method;
- input substitution: using recycled fibre rather than fresh fibre;
- process redesign: e.g., introducing closed loop systems to prevent waste.
- providing incentives for the development and use of safe substitute materials and processes;

- “factor-four” thrift — providing an equivalent product or service while using one-fourth the energy and generating one-fourth the waste.

Options for just transition include:

- establishing a Superfund for communities and workers who will be hurt by the change;
- establishment of a fund — financed by a tax on “dirty” production — to protect workers and communities from dislocations caused by a phase-out of products and production processes;
- community assistance to diversify its economy.

Slogans:

Just Transition, Zero Discharge, Closed Loop

Learning from Environmentalists

The standard stories of social change involve state intervention. For instance, a social movement identifies an alarming problem, attracts a political audience that becomes concerned about the problem, and creates pressure for change. In another version, a social movement creates institutional disruptions; puts forth demands that are adopted by a significant proportion of the electorate; and forces the state to make concessions. In yet another possible version, a social movement struggles to protect the conditions of production, the economy is politicized, a crisis ensues, and the state acts to regulate the conditions of production.

The common element of all three stories is the conclusion of “concessions by the state” or new regulations on the conditions of production.

The continued relevance of these generic stories of how to make social change is now open to question. Recent campaigns by social movements have demonstrated an ability to raise the alarm about problems, attract audiences, and cause changes in the production process long before the state passes regulations. The classic case is the B.C. pulp and paper industry, which changed the production process to reduce the use of chlorine years before the regulators acted to command and control toxic releases. Another, more recent, example is the Nike campaign.

Environmentalists set the original goal of chlorine-free pulp production long before governments were ready to do so; they proposed most of the regulatory structure and content; and they lobbied and mobilized public pressure to force through changes that almost no one

else thought possible when their campaign began. Contrary to the view of the classical organizing culture that there was nothing anyone could do right away that was going to have a long-term effect, organizations that exemplified the demonstration and mass media culture created changes that did make a difference. Significantly fewer toxics are now being discharged into the B.C. environment than before the campaign began.

Traditionally, the left has drawn the public's attention to an alarming problem in an effort to create a political opportunity for the state to act. But in the toxics and Nike debates, environmentalists and human rights activists moved to occupy the traditional standpoint of the state and dictate the conditions of production. Consumers and NGOs have forced major corporations to change, while governments and certainly political parties and politicians were left as mere spectators. We should carefully consider their example.

Strategy and Tactics

At present, the basic concepts of clean production and just transition lack the resonance of public issues such as the dangers of toxic baby toys. The iconic images and stories of toxic events — Love Canal, for example — that are in circulation provide a schema or frame that the media and the public use to understand the new threat represented by toxic toys. We have yet to find our “On to Ottawa” trek in the debate around clean production and just transition. Toward that end, and following the lead of environmentalists and human rights activists, we should carefully select a test case for building a public understanding of clean production and the need for a just transition.

The test case will involve communicating the significant facts of the issue, creating evocative principles, and identifying public venues to make claims on state regulators and the public. The goal of the solutions agenda is to take up an existing controversy and bring a new form and solidity to the currents of opinion — in this case, on clean production and just transition — that have already been developed by labor activists, academics, and environmentalists.

Return to Gold River

British Columbia has no lack of possible test cases. For the purposes of discussion, consider the case of Gold River. In September, 1998 the Bowater Corporation announced the shutdown of the Gold River market pulp mill. The closure threatens to throw 380 mill workers out of work and virtually close the single-industry town of Gold River.

Having witnessed the loss of 4,000 high-wage forest jobs in the last six months, the B.C. government is frantically reaching for a life preserver called environmental deregulation and stumpage rollbacks. The NDP is now poised to squander scarce public revenues in zero-sum competitions to “save” the B.C. forest industry.

Rather than succumb to industry threats of imminent mill closures, we need to articulate a clean production/just transition alternative. Historically, the production of paper occurred in an open system of materials flow. Corporations have taken trees and transformed them into paper products for use by consumers who have in turn discarded worn-out products. From a clean production standpoint, the production and consumption of products are not unrelated events but stages in the flow of materials. In the clean production vision, a pulp mill would become a closed loop in which manufacturers retained responsibility for their products until those products were reused.

But before we can talk about the creation of a closed-loop mill at Gold River we need to answer some basic questions. How much paper will we need in the future? What kind of paper? What fiber sources for paper can we sustainably use? Perhaps we will conclude that the fiber sources for the Gold River mill are inadequate or that the mill should be scaled back. Facing the stark reality that some of the current jobs at the mill may be unsustainable, we need to develop a parallel just transition strategy.

For the clean production/just transition campaign, the Gold River mill could represent the realization of the solution agenda’s demand, threat, and offer. The mill could take the poison out of paper; it could use ecologically certified fiber. The project could be the demand for clear-cut/chlorine-free paper realized; it would offer an alternative to chlorine-bleaching and clear-cutting old growth while holding out this threat: any paper producers that resisted changing their production processes would lose their markets. The clean-paper niche market may be a way to smooth out the booms and busts of the market pulp cycle. And the workers who may lose their jobs will be assured of a just transition.

The solutions agenda could change the dynamics of industry job blackmail in B.C. resource towns. We could turn a catastrophic event, a mill closure, into an emotionally charged story that comes to stand as a test of clean production and just transition. But we need a campaign — a campaign that is understandable, presentable, and winnable — a test case, not just another political economist’s story of tragedy and death.